

10 Myths about school shootings

The profile of the gun-toting student in a trench coat is just one of the myths about the rare but murderous attacks in the nation's schools.

Here are 10 myths about school shootings, compiled by MSNBC.com from a 2002 study by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education. The researchers studied case files and other primary sources for 37 attacks by current or former students, and also interviewed 10 of the perpetrators.

Myth No. 1. "He didn't fit the profile."

In fact, there is no profile. "There is no accurate or useful 'profile' of students who engaged in targeted school violence," the researchers found.

The stereotypes of teens in Goth makeup or other types of dress are not useful in preventing attacks. Just as in other areas of security -- workplace violence, airplane hijacking, even presidential assassination -- too many innocent students will fit any profile you can come up with, and too many attackers will not.

"The demographic, personality, school history, and social characteristics of the attackers varied substantially," the report said. Attackers were of all races and family situations, with academic achievement ranging from failing to excellent.

Most, but not all, have been male, though that fact alone doesn't help an adult rule in or out someone as dangerous.

Myth No. 2. "He just snapped."

Rarely were incidents of school violence sudden, impulsive acts. Attackers do not "just snap," but progress from forming an idea, to planning an attack, to gathering weapons. This process can happen quickly, but sometimes the planning or gathering weapons are discoverable.

Myth No. 3. "No one knew."

Before most of the attacks, someone else knew about the idea or the plan. "In most cases, those who knew were other kids: friends, schoolmates, siblings and others. However, this information rarely made its way to an adult." Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused concern or indicated a need for help.

Myth No. 4. "He hadn't threatened anyone."

Too much emphasis is placed on threats. Most attackers did not threaten, and most threateners did not attack. A child who talks of bringing a gun to school, or seeking revenge on teachers or classmates, poses a threat, whether or not a threat is made.

Myth No. 5. "He was a loner."

In many cases, students were considered in the mainstream of the student population and were active in sports, school clubs or other activities.

Only one-quarter of the students hung out with a group of students considered to be part of a "fringe group."

Myth No. 6. "He was crazy."

Only one-third of the attackers had ever been seen by a mental health professional, and only one-fifth had been diagnosed with a mental disorder. Substance abuse problems were also not prevalent. "However, most attackers showed some history of suicidal attempts or thoughts, or a history of feeling extreme depression or desperation." Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures.

Myth No. 7. "If only we'd had a SWAT team or metal detectors."

Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were over well before a SWAT team could have arrived. Metal detectors have not deterred students who were committed to killing themselves and others.

Myth No. 8. "He'd never touched a gun."

Most attackers had access to weapons, and had used them prior to the attack. Most of the attackers acquired their guns from home.

Myth No. 9. "We did everything we could to help him."

"Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack," and said they had tried without success to get someone to intervene. Administrators and teachers were targeted in more than half the incidents.

Myth No. 10. "School violence is rampant."

It may seem so, with media attention focused on a spate of school shootings. In fact, school shootings are extremely rare. Even including the more common violence that is gang-related or dispute-related, only 12 to 20 homicides a year occur in the 100,000 schools in the U.S. In general, school assaults and other violence have dropped by nearly half in the past decade.

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